

ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

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PRESENTATIONS: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Presentations provide exciting ways to communicate research results to participants and stakeholding audiences. Constructed from multiple materials and using diverse presentational modes, they can captivate audiences, powerfully presenting participant perspectives and illuminating key features of the research. Presentations provide the possibility of clear and effective communication based on richly evocative accounts that accurately capture and represent people's experiences. They may range from simple verbal presentations to complex performances incorporating multiple forms of visual and electronic media that effectively communicate with a wide variety of audiences.

Even academic and professional conferences now provide opportunities for staging a wide variety of presentations. Though direct verbal addresses from prepared papers are still common, many presentations involve creative and innovative approaches that incorporate charts, overheads, electronic materials, roundtable interactive presentations, poster sessions, and structured dialogues. Presenters seek forms of communication that enable them to communicate information efficiently and effectively. These types of presentations are becoming increasingly common in professional and school contexts as teachers and administrators share information or report on school activities.

Such flexible formats are especially relevant in contexts where lengthy written reports may actually inhibit communication with important stakeholding audiences. Children and some adults from poorer or culturally different contexts may not have sufficient familiarity with professional or technical language to enable them to read lengthy formal reports. Further, written reports are often an inadequate vehicle for expressing the full range of participant experiences. They fail to convey the emotional, interactional features of experience, the nature of their social circumstances, or the complexities of their cultural realities. Presentations, when carefully prepared and authentically presented, provide the means for more clearly and effectively communicating the concrete reality of people's lives and the elements that need to be taken into careful account when taking action. As with written reports, presentations need to be carefully and creatively planned to suit the audience, the purposes to be achieved, and the outcomes expected.

A group of graduate students presented an evaluative account of their experience of coursework in their program. Direct verbal presentations were supplemented by role plays, poetry, and art. Their presentations were richly peppered with Aboriginal names and terminology, and humor was an integral feature of the dialogical interaction between participants. Not only were they able to provide an enjoyable and informative experience for the audience of students and academic faculty from around the university, they were also able to embody the Aboriginal cultural ethos that was central to the program of study they had engaged. Derived from a preliminary focus group exploration, their presentations clearly depicted the joys, struggles, and other major features of their learning processes. It provided a dramatic counterpoint to the rather soulless, form-filling exercises usually used for class evaluations.

Audiences and Purposes

Research participants using presentations to communicate information about their research will need to identify carefully their audience and purpose in order to achieve the effectiveness of their project. The major question to be asked is "What information should be presented, and how can we communicate most effectively with this particular audience?" In school contexts, audiences of teachers, students, parents, and administrators may require somewhat different presentations, since different agendas will be relevant to each of those audiences, each of whom may have a different part to play in actions emerging from the

research process. All groups, however, will need to understand each other's perspectives, so that they are able to work in unison to achieve their desired purposes.

Presentations therefore will vary according to purposes to be achieved. Short, informal presentations assist participants to communicate the progress of activities to each other, enabling progress to be monitored effectively and ensuring that all are working in unison. These types of presentations will be very different from more carefully structured and planned presentations required at key points in the research process. If participants wish to inform a key stakeholding group—administrators, funding body representative, supporters—of the issues emerging from their inquiries to garner support for actions they wish to take, then more detailed and carefully structured presentations may be necessary.

Presentations will also be affected by desired outcomes. If participants wish to generate a clear or deeper understanding of people's experience, then participants will prepare evocative presentations designed to achieve that effect. Such presentations will be multidimensional, providing a clear picture of significant events, the context in which they occur, and their impact—rational, physical, emotional, and spiritual—on the lives of participant stakeholders. This is a more emotive presentation seeking to engender understanding of the dynamics and complexities of people's experiences and perspectives. If participants wish an audience to focus on more practical issues for planning purposes, then the presentation will take a more didactic form, focusing on key features and elements of the issue investigated. Presentations that keep people informed of activities in progress but require no action on their part will differ from those presentations requiring decisions, inputs, or actions on the part of the audience. In the latter case, the presentations themselves must be structured to make provisions for audience participation at appropriate points.

In recent years I was involved in a curriculum development project to institute a graduate program in indigenous studies. Preliminary research with prospective students and associated audiences identified the content of the program—the skills and knowledge required by the students to achieve their educational, social, and cultural purposes. These provided the basis for content of study, teaching/learning processes, and program organization, including staffing, budgeting, space, timetable, and so on.

As we worked through developmental processes, different means were employed to inform the different audiences of program details. A charted summary of the content areas was produced and used to talk with prospective students about the program. A flow chart assisted the planning team to work through organizational issues with administrative personnel. A series of reports provided relevant information to a variety of other stakeholders, including institutional committees and a community advisory group. These forms of presentation enabled stakeholding developmental partners and participants to maintain a clear picture of the program as it developed and ensured wide acceptance within the institution and the community.

A smaller research study at a local school developed small reports for teachers, administrators, and parents. These were presented verbally to the principal, to a meeting of school staff, and to a meeting of parents. The project was marked by high degrees of participation by parents, and enabled school staff to make changes to ways in which they communicated with parents. The combination of written and verbal presentations provided the means to reach a wide range of participants.

Planning Presentations

Well-planned presentations ensure that stakeholding audiences are well-informed, enabling them to maintain clarity and gain deep insights into the issues investigated. Research participants will use similar processes to report writing for planning presentations (see previous discussion), defining:

- **Audiences:** Who are the audiences to whom we wish to present?
- **Purposes:** What are our purposes in presenting to this audience?
- **Understandings:** What do we wish our audiences to know or understand?
- **Content:** What information or material will assist in achieving this purpose?
- **Format:** What presentational formats might best achieve this purpose?
- **Outcomes:** What do we wish to achieve; what outcomes are desired?

Planning presentations

- Identify the audience and purpose.
- Identify participants whose experiences and perspectives are pertinent to the presentation.
- Review the data for each of these participants.
- Review the categories and issues emerging from analysis of data for each participant.
- Use categories to construct a framework of headings.
- Write a script, using units of meaning and/or elements within the data.
- Review and edit the script, checking for accurate rendering of participant perspectives and appropriateness to audience.
- Member check by having participants read the script.
- Practice the presentation.

The basic outcome of presentation planning is an *outline* or *script* presenting the information in easily accessible form. An outline in dot-point form provides a script that guides people's presentations. The script may be complemented by additional material, including quotations from people's talk or documented information to be read verbatim to an audience. For more formal presentations, people may rehearse their presentation to ensure they are clear about the material to be presented and to keep their presentation within the allotted time.

Research participants therefore need to carefully prepare a script that has the following basic format:

- **Introduction**
 - The focus of the project—the issue investigated
 - The participants
 - The purpose and desired outcomes of the presentation
- **Body of the Presentation**
 - Previous and current activities: What has happened and what is happening
 - Key issues emerging from research: What has been discovered; what is problematic
 - Implications: What needs to be done (actions, next steps)

- **Conclusion**

- Review of major points covered

Presentations should be carefully scripted and directed so that each participant knows precisely where and when to speak, and the material for which they are responsible. Practice provides both clarity and confidence, maximizing the possibility of an informative and effective presentation. This is especially important for people who are not used to speaking publicly, because their inclusion—the effect of people speaking for themselves in their own voice—dramatically increases the power of a presentation.

Only in rare situations should people read from a pre-prepared written report. Though these types of presentations provide people with feelings of safety and accuracy, they usually detract from the purpose of the event. The written word is different in form and function from the spoken word, and people reading from a paper usually fail to convey the meaningfulness that is a necessary function of a presentation. We have all experienced forms of presentation, delivered in mournful monotone or excited exuberance, that rattle or drone on and on. Usually there is far too much information for the audience to absorb and little opportunity to process that information. Rarely do audiences in these situations gain appreciable understanding, and retention of information is limited. Presenting an address by reading from a pre-prepared paper is an art that few possess.

Members of a neighborhood collective planned a presentation to a national academic conference, a rather grand event that seemed somewhat imposing to them. After carefully identifying the purpose of their presentation—the major message they wished to present to a largely academic audience—they carefully reviewed the material they had accumulated, identifying and assessing those features that appeared central to research in which they had engaged. These features were ordered into a framework of ideas—headings and subheadings—and persons were allocated to take responsibility for the various sections. They rehearsed their presentation a number of times, reallocating some material to different people or places until all participants were clear on what they needed to say and when. The actual presentation at the conference was highly successful, providing the audience with a clear understanding of the power of community participation in a research process. The degree of engagement of the audience was evidenced by their rapt attention and the diversity of questions they asked. The participants were highly delighted by the success of their presentation, an event that further heightened their research skills and feelings of empowerment.

Enhancing Verbal Presentations: Audio/Visual Materials

“Talk is cheap” is a common saying that has relevance to presentations. Though parsimonious verbal presentations can sometimes be effective, it requires a skilled and practiced

orator to hold an audience for an extended period. Interest and understanding is greatly extended when visual and auditory materials are incorporated into presentations, aiding in clarity and enabling significant quantities of factual information to be presented. Statistical summaries, numerical information, or lists of features and elements may be presented in chart form or as overheads. Charts have the advantage of providing a constantly available record of issues, but suffer sometimes from problems of size. Overheads and other electronic means of displaying information have great clarity, but can only be projected one sheet at a time, thus placing limits on the flexibility of a presentation.

A variety of visual aids will complement and enhance verbal information. Diagrams, maps, concept maps, symbolic representations, figures, and so on, provide effective ways for presenting information and focusing attention. Whiteboards or chalkboards also enable the active construction of illustrations and diagrams to stimulate attention and enable the structured exposition of a wide range of subject matter.

These processes can be presented in highly sophisticated form using electronic media in the form of audio or video recording, or electronic presentations derived from such software as Microsoft PowerPoint. It is important to ensure that these are used in moderation, since extended use of videos or electronic media can be detrimental to a presentation, creating a passive audience and detracting from feelings of engagement. Judicious use of electronic media, however, can provide vivid illustrations or large bodies of information, greatly enhancing people's ability or willingness to participate in ongoing dialogue. As a stimulus they are sometimes unparalleled.

At each stage, therefore, we need to ask how we can best achieve the types of understanding we desire. Presentations can be greatly enhanced by using:

- Maps
- Charts
- Artwork
- Concept maps
- Lists
- Figures
- Overheads
- Audio recording
- Video recording
- Electronic presentations

For some years colleagues and I have provided workshops on cultural sensitivity or race relations for a variety of audiences. The intent was to assist them to investigate ways of modifying their professional work practices to ensure greater effectiveness in cross-cultural contexts. These sessions have been greatly enhanced by having participants view short segments of a video film showing indigenous people presenting accounts of their experiences. One popular segment presents an old man talking of the time police and welfare officers came to take away his children. Moved to tears, he narrates the way he was prevented from taking any action as his children were driven away. Returning the next day he talks of how he put a piece of old tin over his only remaining reminder of his children, their footprints in the sand. This segment, used many times in workshops and presentations, never fails to evoke rich and sometimes intense discussions. It provides keen insight into the way past events continue to affect community life. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words.

For some audiences, presentations may take on an almost concert-like appearance. Creative presentations may incorporate a variety of materials and performances (see following discussion), providing a rich body of factual information and authentic understandings of people's lived realities. Presentations, constructed from materials derived from the analysis of data, use key features and elements as the basis for a script, incorporating "quotes" from the data to highlight important information. Presenters may incorporate tape-recorded information derived from participant interviews, read from reviewed materials, or incorporate, as appropriate, segments of video or audio recordings, poems, songs, or role plays. The rich variety of possibilities enables audiences of children, youth, and adult participants to fully express the ideas with which they have been working.

Interactive Presentations

Presentations are more effective when they are interactive. It is difficult to stimulate interest or involvement in a research process when the audience is passive and uninvolved. When presenters dominate presentations, other participants are likely to feel "left out," or marginalized, as if their perspectives and issues are less important. Wherever possible, presentations should provide opportunities for all participants to interact with the material presented. At regular intervals, audiences should have opportunities to participate in the unfolding presentation, commenting on issues, asking for clarification, or offering their perspectives on issues presented. As part of an "hermeneutic dialectic"—meaning-making dialogue—these processes not only enable people to extend and clarify their understanding, but also increase their feelings of inclusion and ownership in the project at hand.

Presentations may also include small-group work, enabling participants to explore issues in greater depth by engaging in dialogue, or peruse related documents or materials. Feedback from small-group discussions provides a further means to gain greater clarity and understanding, especially about points of contention or uncertainty. This points to the need for flexibility, to allow participants to take advantage of opportunities arising in the course of presentations. It is possible to turn a presentation into a workshop or focus group, so that audiences become active participants in the ongoing development of the investigation. In these circumstances time may be allocated for this purpose to allow participants to take advantage of the ideas emerging from their work together.

When I work with research groups I often have them chart the key elements of their recent activities. Each group then speaks of their chart, reporting on their progress and any issues arising. The audience is able to comment or ask questions to clarify or extend the presenters' comments. This not only informs the audience clearly, but assists the presenters to extend their thinking about the issues raised—an integral part of the process of re-searching.

PERFORMANCES: REPRESENTING EXPERIENCE ARTISTICALLY AND DRAMATICALLY

Performances extend the possibilities for providing deeper and more effective understandings of the nature of people's experiences. They present multiple possibilities for entering people's subjective worlds to provide audiences with empathetic understandings that greatly increase the power of the research process. Performances enable participants to "report" on their research through:

- Drama
- Role play
- Song
- Poetry
- Dance
- Visual artwork
- Electronic media

By engaging their work performatively, research participants use artistic means to enable audiences to take the perspective of the people whose lives are performed, to enter their experience vicariously, and therefore to understand more empathetically their life-worlds. Using artistic and dramatic media, researchers are able to capture and represent the deeply complex, dynamic, interactive, and emotional qualities of everyday life. They can engage in richly evocative presentations comprehensible to children, families, cultural minorities, the poor, and other previously excluded audiences.

Poetry, music, drama, and art provide the means for creating illuminative, transformative experiences for presenter and audience alike, stimulating awareness of the different voices and multiple discourses occurring in any given social space (Denzin, 1997; Prattis, 1985). They provide the means to interrogate people's everyday realities, by juxtaposing them within the telling, acting, or singing of stories, thus revealing the differences that occur therein and providing the possibility of therapeutic action (Denzin, 1997; Trinh, 1991). While performances fail to provide the certainty required of experimental research, or to reinforce the authority of an official voice (Atkinson, 1992), they present the possibility of producing compassionate understandings that promote effective change and progress (Rorty, 1989).

This is clearly a postmodernism response, making possible the construction of evocative accounts revealing people's concrete, human experience. Performances provide the means of complementing or enhancing reports and presentations by:

- studying the world from the perspective of research participants.
- capturing their lived experience.
- enabling participants to discover truths about themselves and others.
- recognizing multiple interpretations of events and phenomena.
- embedding experience in local cultural contexts.
- recording the deeply felt emotions—love, pride, dignity, honor, hate, envy—and the agonies, tragedies, triumphs, and peaks of human experience embedded in people's actions, activities, and behavior.
- representing people's experience symbolically, visually, or aurally in order to achieve clarity and understanding.

In recent years I have observed some stunning performances that have greatly extended my understanding of people's experience. I have seen class evaluations including poetry, song, role play, and art that provided me with deep insights into the learning experiences of my students, enabling me, as teacher, to extend my thinking about the ways my classes are organized and operate. I have seen the powerful artistic work of small children provide wonderfully illuminative representations of their classroom experience. I have sat in the audience, deeply moved by middle school children's dramatic presentation of an issue touching their school lives. In all these, I have been surprised by the depth and extent of my responses to these performative presentations, feeling deeply "touched" by what I have seen and heard, and more sensitive to the nature of the performers' experiences and how the issues they represent fit within and affect their lives.

Planning Performances: Developing a Script

Performances are built from the outcomes of data analysis, using similar techniques to those used to fashion reports and presentations. Key features and elements provide the material from which a performance is produced, with participants working creatively to develop effective means for representing their experience. These may be constructed as **poems**, **songs**, or **drama**, or represented as **symbolic** or **visual art**. As with written and other forms of representation, performances need to be conducted with a clear understanding of the *purpose* they wish to achieve with a specific *audience*. Participants should ask: "What do we wish this audience to know or understand? And how might we best achieve that knowledge or understanding through our performance?"

- Identify the **audience** and **purpose**.
- Identify **participants** whose experiences and perspectives are to be represented.
- Review the **data** for each of these participants.
- Review the **categories and issues** emerging from analysis of data for each participant.
- Use categories to **construct a framework** of key features of experiences and perspectives.
- **Write a script**, using units of meaning and/or elements within the data.
- **Review and edit** the script, checking for accurate rendering of participant perspectives and appropriateness to audience.
- **Member check** by having participants read the script.
- **Rehearse** the performance.

Producing Performances

As with any script, there will be decisions to be made about who will perform which roles, how the setting will be designed, what clothing or costumes will be worn, and who will direct the staging of the performance (i.e. take responsibility for overall enactment of the performance).

Rehearsals are an important feature of performances, enabling participants to review the quality and appropriateness of their production and providing opportunities to clarify or modify the script. People will also become familiar with their roles, sometimes memorizing the parts they need to play, though readings may be used effectively where people have minimal time for preparation or rehearsal.

Sometimes action research requires research participants to formulate on-the-spot performances, so that role plays requiring minimal preparation provide an effective means for people to communicate their messages. For this mode of performance, participants should formulate an outline of a script from the material emerging from their analysis, ad-libbing the words as they enact the scene they wish to represent. Role plays are especially powerful when participants act out their own parts, speaking in their own words and revealing, in the process, clear understanding of their own experiences and perspectives.

Video and Electronic Media

Although live performances provide effective ways to communicate the outcomes of research, video and other electronic media offer powerful and flexible tools for reaching more extended audiences. Not only do video productions provide possibilities for more sophisticated performances, but they enable the inclusion of people whose personal makeup inhibits them from participating in live performances. The technology now available enables video productions to be presented on larger screens, to be shown on computer screens or to be incorporated into more complex online productions.

Dirk Schouten and Rob Watling (1997) provide a useful model for integrating video into education, training, and community development projects. Their process includes:

- making a recording scheme.
- recording the material.
- making an inventory of the material.
- deciding what functions the material will serve in the text.
- making a rough structure for the text.
- making an edit scheme on the basis of the rough structure.
- editing the text.

Although producing a quality video requires high levels of expertise and careful production, current technology enables even amateurs to produce short and effective products. By recording events in schools, research participants can provide engaging and potentially productive productions that extend the potential of their work. This type of recording enables people to provide sometimes dramatic renderings of their experiences, and to engage in forms of research from which they were previously excluded.

Videotaping also provides research participants with a variety of means for storing and presenting their material. Possibilities today include storing productions in videotape form, on CD/DVDs, or within computers, and these can be viewed or transmitted through a variety of media, including video and DVD players, streaming video, and community television. These formats provide the possibility of reaching a wide variety of audiences and using video productions for many effective educational purposes.